

DICE of DESTINY

By
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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Senor don Antonio de la Guerra, wealthy Spanish ranch owner on the American side of the Mexican border, is informed by his American attorney that a technical error has been found in his will. The ranch owner signs a new document without reading it.

CHAPTER II.—Teresa, only grandchild of the ranch owner, finds evidence of a struggle in the library and her grandfather must believe that the son has been killed. He carries across the border by Mexican rebels. Billy Stanway, Teresa's sweetheart, takes command of the situation and orders the servants and vaqueros to arm themselves.

CHAPTER III.—Stanway, with twenty men, starts in pursuit of the rebels. He meets Eduardo Ramon Torre, kingman of the library who has been wounded, he claims, by the escaping rebels.

CHAPTER IV.—Stanway loses the rebel trail and returns to the hacienda. Teresa shows him the copy of the new will which she has found and which leaves all the property to Torre.

CHAPTER V.—An emissary from the rebels arrives with the news that the son is well and is being held for \$20,000 ransom. Torre tells Teresa's sweetheart, as the heir, but Stanway takes command of the situation.

CHAPTER VI.—Dempston, the son's lawyer, is brought to the hacienda at Stanway's order and is accused of having received pay from Torre for altering the son's will.

CHAPTER VII.—Torre, who has been detained under guard by Stanway, admits that he is responsible for the son's disappearance. He demands \$20,000 to release all claim to the estate and to return the son unharmed. Refusal will mean the son's death within 24 hours.

CHAPTER VIII.—The hacienda is attacked in the night on a signal given by Torre from within. He is foiled in his attempt to escape.

CHAPTER IX.—In the confusion, Teresa is abducted and sent to her grandfather's home. She is found wounded. Torre admits he is responsible for Teresa's disappearance, and releases his demand to \$20,000. Stanway starts in search of Teresa.

CHAPTER X.

A Bold Game.

"You will know, Josefa, if there is anything missing from the master's room?"

"Si, señor. I know each little thing. There has been no change for many years."

The small, wrinkled, almost black face of the little old Indian woman looked up curiously into Stanway's.

"Then come. Let us hurry."

He led the way. They went through the drawing room, where one of the house servants was lighting the candles, where Torre was pacing back and forth, his restlessness showing for the first time.

Teresa de la Guerra's scream had sounded through the house early that morning—at three o'clock. The long day had dragged, and now it was growing dark.

Still Torre and Juarez were prisoners; still Dempston fretted and fumed and sulked in the great library.

Torre looked up quickly, his eyes eager, expectant. Stanway glanced at him, giving no satisfaction in the swift turning of his eyes. Torre frowned and bit at his lip. Juarez looked to his leader with both question and criticism in his gaze.

Josefa followed the rancher, and they passed on through the drawing room. The door closed behind them.

"Now, Josefa."

Stanway threw open the door of the Senor de la Guerra's bedroom. Josefa, lifting a very white handkerchief to her very black eyes, crossed herself and stepped over the threshold.

"Look, Josefa! Is there anything missing?"

He had the key in his pocket; she had not seen it. He looked at her in a moment's time with expectant waiting, not sure why he was so eager for the word she should say. Josefa's eyes, showing again as she folded and smoothed her handkerchief, roved about the room.

"She shook her head slowly, and still her eyes went upon their quest."

"There is nothing missing," she said, speaking thoughtfully. "Everything—"

She broke off suddenly, her old figure growing rigid, her eyes brightening. Then she ran across the room to a far corner which was a bit in shadow as Stanway held his candle above his head.

"It is gone!" she cried, amazement in her voice. "See where it has been for twenty years—for more than twenty years! And it is gone!"

"What, Josefa?" Stanway hurried to his side. "What is it that is gone?"

"The key!" she whispered, her voice suddenly dropping. "See where it hung so long that it left its own shape like a picture. But who could have taken it?"

Stanway, peering above the old woman's head, the candle held close to the wall, saw, dimly enough but plainly, the mark which the key, hanging from a little peg, had left.

"What key was it?" he asked sharply.

"The master's. He would allow no one to touch it. He had it kept there always, where he could see it in the morning, at night when he went to bed. And it is gone!"

"But," cried Stanway impatiently, his hand upon her arm, "what was it for? What did it open?"

Josefa looked at him with wide eyes. "But the master would be angry if he knew. He has had it there for twenty years—much longer, I think."

"But, Josefa," Stanway hurried on, "can't you think what door it opens? Can't you guess? I must know, Josefa. Think. Is it some room in the house here?"

"No, no, señor! Not here," Josefa shook her head. "I should know."

Then, I think, señor, it must be the key to some room in his beloved Spain. It is for no room upon the rancho. Of that I am sure, señor."

"What is this, Josefa?" Suddenly he had drawn the great, heavy key from his pocket, holding it before her eyes. She stared at it, then with a little cry put out her shaking hands for it.

"That is it, gracias a Dios!" she muttered. "We shall put it back so that the master will not be angry when he returns. Quick, señor! Let us put it back. Maybe it's being brought the bad luck. Maybe when it is on the wall once more good luck will come back to the rancho."

It was not until he had again hung the key upon the peg that Stanway succeeded in getting the now delighted Josefa to leave the room. When she had gone he closed the door, came back to the key, and took it again in his hands.

"That opens the door behind which he is a prisoner," he told himself half angrily. "He and perhaps Teresa. I have the key, and I can't tell where the door is. And it is getting dark. Teresa—"

Long and moodily he stared at the cumbersome key. Its dull surface



Stared at the Cumbersome Key.

seemed to him to be hiding from him the things he wanted to know.

It seemed to him that suddenly it had grown cold there in De la Guerra's bedroom.

He shivered, and, taking up his candle, went his way back through the drawing room, with no word to Torre, with no glance even, for he feared that now he could not let his eyes go to the handsome, evil face and keep his hand back, and at last to Pedro's bedside.

Pedro, waiting for him impatiently, tried to lift himself upon an elbow, and falling in that turned his bright black eyes upon the American.

"What did she say, Josefa?" he asked quickly. "It is the master's key?"

"Yes, Pedro," answered Stanway dispiritedly. "But what is the use? She does not know what door it opens."

"But I know!" said Pedro brightly. "You know!"

"You know!" Stanway laid his hand on the wounded man's arm. "Tell me, Quick!"

"When the master was young he lived in Spain, where the old master, his father, sent him to go to school. In the home there, builded of stones like an old castle, señor, was a room where many times he was locked up by his tutor because he was wild and did not fall in love with his books. I have heard him laugh and tell about it to the padre from La Panza. When he came away he brought the key to that prison room with him. That is the key you have, señor!"

Stanway looked at the man with swift suspicion. Pedro seemed excited over the key; a look of great shrewdness was in his eyes, and the key unlocked a door in Spain! If he was becoming delirious—

"I am not in a fever, señor," said Pedro quickly, seeing the thought in the American's eyes. "But that key tells me something. Every night before going to my bed I go to the master's room to see if he wishes anything, to take any commands for the next day. I went last night after it was late, just before I went to the señorita's door. It was habit, señor. I could not have gone to sleep unless I went there."

"Well?" sharply.

"I heard a little sound. It was the scratching of a window shade. I went, closed the window, and locked it tightly. And while looking for the sound I saw the key in its place. It was there at eleven o'clock last night, señor."

"You are sure, Pedro? You are very certain that this key was in the master's room at eleven o'clock?"

"Very certain, señor."

"Then—But it is impossible, Pedro! You say that you locked the windows? All of them?"

"All, señor."

"And the door as you came out?"

"I locked, señor. The key was under my bed. I gave it to you just now. And there is only one key upon the rancho—only one in the world which will unlock it!"

"But then it is impossible!" Stanway, restless, upon his feet strode back and forth, frowning. In the key had been there last night, if the door and windows had been locked if they had been locked when he went to the room—then how could one of the men who attacked Pedro have had it in his hand at three o'clock in the morning?

"You mean," he said slowly, coming back to the bedside, "that the attack upon you and Celestino was made by men who are among the house servants or the De la Guerra vaqueros?"

"No, señor. There was no hesitation—the voice was confident. 'The men were handkerchiefs about their faces, but I know that they were not of our men. They were strangers to me.'"

"But," cried Stanway, "how could such a thing be? How could they

have gotten into the master's room? Then how could they have gotten to the señorita's room without some one of our men seeing them? And why should they have brought the key?"

"The key is heavy, good to strike a hard blow," replied Pedro. "If a man had lost his knife and needed a weapon he might take it. No, señor."

"But how?" Stanway broke off, his eyes ran from Pedro's face to sweep the room, a sudden light came into them, and the blood ran into his face.

"My God," he cried, "I see it!"

"You are wiser than I, see it?" Pedro smiled contentedly and closed his eyes, looking very pale and weak.

"You will let me have news when there is anything, señor? I could get well quickly with good news."

Stanway promised, took Pedro's hand quickly, turned and hurried out of the room. His step was quick, his eyes very bright.

"I understand now Torre's signal on the window," he muttered as he went. "And—by heaven, how blind I was! I know what he meant when he said he was taunting a man whom he did not like! It's the boldest game a man ever played!"

CHAPTER XI.

"You Have Overplayed Your Hand." "I am afraid that I have been indiscreet, Señor Stanway," Torre, with his old smile charged now with something of mockery and much of triumph, held out a little piece of white paper to Stanway, who, key in hand, had just come from Pedro on his way to the master's room. "But I think that I can plead an altogether unusual position as my excuse. You will pardon me, señor?"

Stanway took the paper, guessing what it was, and read it swiftly:

MI Querido Señor Billy: To save, para grande, to save me from all that is horrible, there is no way but to do what Torre asks. In grandfather's room, behind the great mahogany bed, there is a painting on the wall.

There is a spot in the woodwork, three feet from the floor, ten from the northwest corner, where you must press with your finger. It will disclose the banco. Give him the money—for the sake of

Your Teresa.

"You will pardon my having read it" again smilingly from Torre.

"Where did you get this thing?" cried Stanway.

Torre pointed to the window, whose panes he had broken just before three o'clock.

"There. On the floor. Some one threw it in on the floor while you were running so giddily across the border. You see this is very well planned, señor. Is it not? Even my lieutenants—"

"If I do not do as she asks?" cut in Stanway, his low-lidded eyes sharp upon Torre's.

Torre shrugged.

"Who knows? Perhaps they will take the trouble to find a priest to give the señorita in holy matrimony to—"

In sudden rage Stanway, his nerves jangling, his rage reddening his face, leaped at the man, and as he leaped struck, struck hard—his hand, clenched fist smashing into the evil smile, cutting the lips so that the blood ran from them, sending Torre reeling backward across the room.

"Shut up!" he cried hoarsely. "You mention the señorita once more and—"

His teeth closed with a little ominous click. Torre, wiping the blood from his lips, glared at him with a boundless, almost speechless rage.

"Coward!" he sneered. "Since I am a prisoner, with a half dozen men ready to spring upon me, you attack me—"

"Gaucha!" called Stanway.

"Si, señor!" Gaucha's brown face brightening, his eyes looking happier than they had looked for two days.

"Do not interfere. Do not let your men take hand, no matter what happens." Then he swung about upon Torre. "Do you want to finish it now?" he said curtly.

But Torre was once more himself, smiling, at ease, only a fierce hatred in his eyes.

"Gracias, señor!" he returned. "I shall merely make you pay for that blow in my own way. And now I ask another ten thousand dollars as ransom for the old man and the girl. Ten thousand dollars for a blow, señor! Do you care to strike again?"

Stanway shrugged.

"You have overplayed your hand, Torre," he said quietly. "This note from the señorita makes me sure of what I was beginning to suspect. Gaucha, come with me."

With no further word, leaving Torre's mystified face looking after him, he went out, Gaucha at his heels.

"Gaucha," he said, speaking swiftly from beyond the closed door, "I want you to come to the master's room. Bring some men with you—six, ten—I don't know how many we shall need. Let two of them bring axes. Let all carry side arms. Bring the picked men, Gaucha; the hardest men on the rancho. I think that there is going to be fighting this time."

"The master?" cried Gaucha. "The señorita? You know—"

"I know nothing. But I think—that they have never for a second left the house! Hurry, Gaucha!"

And Gaucha hurried, his own face as mystified as Torre's. Stanway went quickly to the bedroom.

"Somewhere in these great thick walls there is a passageway," he whispered to himself. "It runs from this room throughout the house and to the east wing where Teresa's rooms are."

"Somewhere, down below perhaps, there is a room, a dungeon? Think that it is just under the drawing room; I think that that is where De la Guerra is; that many of the things which Torre said were meant to be heard by the old man that they might want and mock him; I think that Torre's men down there heard the crashing glass, the words which went with it. I think that we are going to find De la Guerra and Teresa there."

He studied the walls.

There was nothing to hint at a secret door.

He moved out the bed, found the spot which Teresa's note told of, set his thumb to it, and set to, and with a sharp thump, showing a great iron safe set in the wall. The safe was

locked, the key missing. But he knew that he had found De la Guerra's bank. He closed the panel swiftly as Gaucha and his men came to the door.

"Que es, señor?" Gaucha asked quickly. And the black eyes of the dark-faced men thronging behind him—eager, expectant—told as well as words that Gaucha had whispered to his men that the American had a plan, that hope lay behind it.

"Come in, Gaucha. Shut the door. How many men?"

They entered as he spoke. He counted as the last man closed the door behind him.

"Ten, señor. Five more are coming."

"And—sternly—you can vouch for them, for all of them? You can trust every man to the uttermost, Gaucha?"

"To the uttermost, señor," as sternly. "To the death in the service of the master and—his voice breaking a little—"the señorita."

"And the other five?"

"The same."

"Good! This is my plan. Come close, all of you."

He addressed them in Spanish, speaking swiftly, his voice lowered so that the men must crane their necks and lean forward to hear. He told them of his hope that those they sought had never been taken out of the hacienda.

"Now," he ended, "there is no doubt a passageway running from here to the señorita's rooms. If we find this end of it and attack they may escape at the other end. So we must be ready."

"Gaucha, send two men into the señorita's rooms. Let them be ready, armed and watchful. Send two more to the stairway. Let Torre and Juarez be bound and watched over by one man only, a man whom you can trust and who will blow their brains out before he lets them escape."

"Let every other man in the house be armed and ready. Then—"

"Then," with quiet determination—"we shall find where the passage is if we have to tear down the walls. Hurry, Gaucha!"

Gaucha ran upon his errand, calling by name the men he wished to go with him. Stanway, bidding those with him to be very silent, not knowing what means the men he sought might have of overhearing what happened in the room, began a silent search for some sign of a passageway in the thick walls.

And now at last fate and the quick eyes of a vaquero aided him. There was a little scratch on the redwood of the wall just opposite the door through which they had entered, a fresh white scratch. It was Mendez, a young Mexican, who saw it; it was Mendez who found a mark of a greasy thumb upon the same panel, some four feet from the floor.

"Aqui, esta!" he muttered. "Señor, look!"

Stanway's heart beat wildly when he saw what Mendez had found.

"The door of the passageway!" he whispered. "Sh! Be still! Even take off your boots, compañeros. We are going to give them no warning. But first, Mendez, bring Dempston here, quick! I think he is going to talk now."

Mendez hurried, and presently came back, he and the immense Vidal, walking at Dempston's right and left.

"Dempston," whispered Stanway, meeting him, "make no sound. If he cries out—to Vidal and Mendez—if he makes a sound choke the life out of him. Do you understand, Dempston?"

Dempston's pale lips opened, but no words came forth. A little shiver ran through him.

"We have learned everything, Dempston. Stanway went on in his whispering voice. "Even to the hiding place. There is the door." He pointed to the panel with the thumb-print upon it. "I think that we can send you to the penitentiary for a long time with very little trouble. Will you talk now, Dempston?"

Dempston hesitated, denial upon his lips, growing fear in his eyes.

"What do you want to know?" he asked in a shaking whisper. "I—Oh, my God! This has gone further already—"

"I want to know how many men are with Torre in this thing?"

"There—there is Juarez—and—and—"

"Don't be a fool as well as a coward, Dempston!" muttered Stanway. "You are such a petty little thief that nobody is going to want to prosecute you if you help us now. There is Torre and Juarez and you. Who else?"

"I—I don't know," Dempston licked his dry lips and swayed between Vidal and Mendez as though he were going to fall. "Oh, I was a fool—"

"Granted. But tell what you know while you have the chance. How many?"

"Seven, I think," chattered Dempston. "Seven besides Torre and Juarez. Five outside, two outside with the horses."

"Outside?" queried Stanway.

"Yes. To ride away, leading extra horses, so that it would sound like a number of riders were racing for the border. To leave the trail which you followed south. The other five to do the work inside."

"And De la Guerra was never to be taken from the house?"

"No. It seemed safer this way."

"There was every hazard in it—"

"Simply because you happened to be at the rancho," returned Dempston with a little flash of bitterness. "Had there been only the señorita, it would have been easy to have worked on her love for her grandfather."

"And Torre?"

"Killed a man a month ago in San Antonio—is running away from the gallows. With the money he expected to make from this he could buy the silence of the one man who can identify him as the murderer. It was his only chance."

"Juarez?"

"Is actually a rebel captain. Torre was to give him his share. Then Torre was to have a commission in the rebel army. He looked to distinguished favor when the rebels fought their way into power. Now—"

"Nemesis."

Nemesis was a goddess of justice and retribution. In Greek mythology Nemesis was a goddess personifying allotment, of the divine distribution to every man of the precise share of fortune, good and bad.

"Now, if he goes into Mexico the rebels will shoot him as a traitor. That was another chance he was taking. He was to give five thousand dollars to the cause. For that they let him have Juarez and the other men. He was to give his life if he lied to them, if he tricked them or—if he failed. He could never get across the border without their spies finding him."

Then Gaucha returned with word that everything was ready. Vidal, at

He Turned a Corner.



He Turned a Corner.

Stanway's command, bound Dempston securely once more, hand and foot, and tossed him to the bed as one might toss a sack of wheat. The men had kicked off their shoes and boots, and stood eager and expectant.

Stanway, his revolver in his right hand, pressed with the left thumb upon the spot in the paneling where another thumb had pressed.

There was a little click, and the panel slid back into the wall, showing a narrow doorway, a narrow passageway beyond. There were candles burning there, their steady flames casting a clear, yellow light.

"Each man keep three feet behind the man in front of him," whispered Stanway. "We must have room. Vidal, Gaucha, come just behind me."

He stepped through the door into the two-foot wide hallway which ran along inside the wall, its trend eastward and downward. There were no steps, but the slant led quickly under the foundations of the great adobe building.

Stanway passed the first candle set into a niche in the rough wood wall. Already he felt that he must be below the level of the floor when he came to the second candle. Here the flame was less steady, a little breath of air playing with it.

He turned a corner, the hallway opened up suddenly into a small, rough-walled room some eight or ten feet square.

Across the room was a heavy barred door; in the center of the floor was a couch, and on the couch a man was lying upon his back, his hands clasped behind his head, a cigarette between his lips.

Stanway was in the room, noiseless in his stockinged feet, Vidal at his side. Gaucha was entering when the man heard, turned quickly, and saw them. He sprang to his feet.

But the cry rising to his lips was choked back in his throat by the hard hands of the rancher. The struggle ended almost as soon as it began.

But some sound of the brief scuffle must have penetrated to the other side of the oak door. Before the rest of the vaqueros could crowd into the little room the door had been jerked open, a dark, bearded face showed at the crack.

"There was a snarled curse, the door slammed shut, and there was the sound of other bars lifted across it upon the other side.

"Your axes!" shouted Stanway, leaping to one side to make room. "Vidal, you take one. Get it down, quick!"

But, even to the attack of the great arms of Vidal and another of the cowboys, the great thick door stood defiant as the swift seconds fled by. From the other side came the sound of quick, snappy voices, of scurrying feet, the sound of a cry which tingled through Stanway's blood and sent Vidal with redoubled vigor to the onslaught on the door.

At last the door fell. Stanway and Vidal, side by side, leaped through. There was another hall, wider than the first, shorter. At the end of the hall another door, studded with nails, barred upon the farther side.

Evidently there had been a second guard here, evidently in the next room were the prisoners.

"De la Guerra!" shouted Stanway. "Teresa!"

There was no answer, no sound. "Smash in the door!" he yelled. "Quick! Gaucha, go upstairs. Tell them what has happened. Let them watch out. Order the first man who appears to be shot if he makes a move toward a gun or to escape. Run, Gaucha!"